

A Novel of the Absurd

THE WASHINGTON POST

Friday, November 24, 1978

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Against a Tropical Backdrop

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Washington Post Foreign Service

GEORGETOWN, Guyana, Nov. 23—If only the horror of the bodies rotting under the hot sun in Jonestown could be blotted out, the other events of this extraordinary week here could be stitched together in the style of Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene to form a novel of the absurd in the tropics.

A remote, Kansas-sized nation of less than a million inhabitants and only a dozen years of independence, whose name was seldom spelled right even by the few outsiders who knew it existed, suddenly becomes front-page news around the world.

Its languid capital, populated by less than 200,000 and run by exceedingly polite if somewhat deliberate civil servants, is inundated by an unending flood of foreign journalists, each of whom demands exclusive access to everything and everyone without delay.

Its government, which retains the parliamentary trappings and tropical colonial buildings of its former British rulers but is run now by socialist leaders who want to be addressed as "comrade," is not quite certain how to handle all this because, in the words of one foreign diplomat here, "They are still trying to decide whether to have an open or closed society."

Its small sector of private enterprise—most industry and large stores are nationalized—is being infused with American and Guyanese dollars by the correspondents and U.S. military and civilian personnel crowding the hotels and restaurants, buying out its clothing stores and monopolizing most of its taxis.

The result has been a mixture of confusion and occasional remarkable cooperation, frustration and good humor, tragedy and economic windfall, and the distant stench of death mingled with the warm love of life of the Guyanese people.

Guyana has been open to the world this week as never before.

"Americans would never come here

otherwise," one cab driver said, perhaps forgetting the hundreds of Americans who had come and become part of the settlement in Jonestown.

This tropical country is nearly 90 percent covered by dense rain forest. Most of its people are here along the Atlantic coast, where ocean breezes moderate the heat with frequent showers. It has no highway or rail link with its neighbors on three sides: Venezuela, Brazil and Suriname.

Guyana, located on the northern rim of South America, considers itself a Caribbean nation. Its best connections by air are with Trinidad. Its papers are filled with news from the Caribbean islands. Its music is West Indian. Its socialist model, in rhetoric, is Cuba.

Only a little more than 40 percent of its population is black, descendants of Africans brought here by the Dutch and British, but it is their political party that has controlled the government since independence.

Half of Guyana's citizens are East Indians, who make up the bulk of its merchant class but have largely been shut out of the top positions of power in the government of Prime Minister Forbes Burnham. The mix also includes Chinese, indigenous Amerindians and some British-descended "white Guyanese" who remained behind after independence in 1966.

The people and the government are proud of their country, which is un-are its basic crops and industry) but derdeveloped (sugar, rice and bauxite not desperately impoverished. Its relatively few roads are filled with cars and bicycles. City dwellers are well dressed and healthy.

Except for a recent epidemic of street muggings here, called "choke-and-robs," there is relatively little violence. The Guyanese were deeply shocked by the events at Jonestown last weekend.

At first they explained it to themselves as something Americans did to Americans, but now questions are being asked by opposition politicians and newspapers and others about whether the Guyanese government

should not have done something about Jonestown long before this.

They are asking how dozens of guns, including automatic weapons, got into Jonestown; whether it is true that Jonestown was taking in and sending out goods by water via a nearby river to the sea without going through customs, or whether top officials of the government were too friendly with Jonestown leader Jim Jones and looked the other way when stories of strange activities there reached diplomatic and political circles here.

The toughest questions, however, are now being asked by an increasingly insistent foreign press corps here.

Restrictions on access to Jonestown, which can now be reached only by air, and on information coming from anyone but a few Guyanese government and U.S. Embassy spokesmen, the difficulties of using a limited telephone system that has been overwhelmed by the media, and the polite British-style brushoff that Guyanese officials give reporters who push too far have begun to frustrate the press and produce some conflict.

A reporter for one major U.S. newspaper angrily lectured an official of the Ministry of Information about how wrong and foolish it was that he had not been given the same access to the Jonestown scene and elsewhere that a reporter for a competing U.S. newspaper had.

Some reporters became particularly strident at a press conference last night by U.S. military, U.S. embassy and Guyanese officials to report on the removal of bodies from Jonestown and the search for survivors.

Reporters who apparently believed that more should be done to hunt for survivors in the remote rain forest peppered the officials with combative questions that sometimes became lectures.

"How can the United States send a fortune to recover dead bodies," one reporter asked, "and very little to go after survivors in the jungle?"

Sometimes, the reporters' frustrations are carried to noisy luncheon tables in hotel restaurants here, where they are the most numerous patrons—except for three days at the Tower Hotel in the heart of this city. On

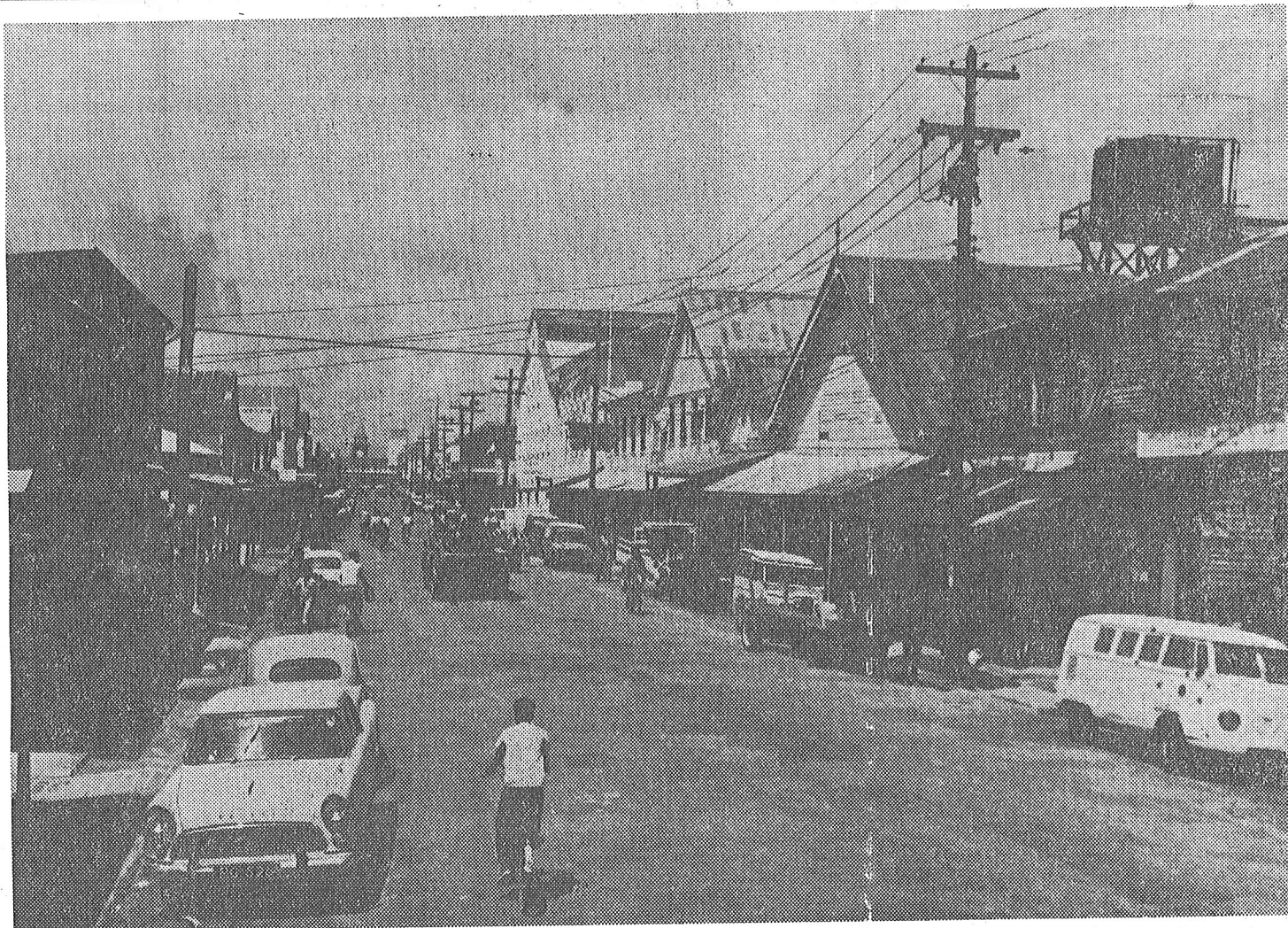
those days, the Chinese soccer team, in Georgetown to play Guyana's national team, occupied many of the Tower's rooms and half the dining room for three meals a day.

But unlike the foreign journalists, the Chinese soccer players were

barely noticed as they filed in noiselessly, ate at two long tables and disappeared again, never to be seen in the lobby or corridors of the hotel until they boarded their buses to leave.

On the night they left, a small crowd gathered outside the hotel.

With the squad of big, rugged-looking Chinese athletes boarding their buses amid the foreign reporters dashing back and forth from the hotel to their taxis, there was much to watch in a city that has not known such excitement since independence day.



Camera Press

Water Street, a main thoroughfare in Georgetown, reflects the leisurely pace of life before Guyana's capital was jarred by Jonestown killings.

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